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Betwixt and Between:

How Male and Female Audiences Engaged with the "Magnetic Girl" to Complicate *Fin-de-Siècle* Gender Roles

Elizabeth Lowry

Abstract: *Lulu Hurst was a young Gilded Age–era performer known for her demonstrations of uncanny physical strength. For the most part, Hurst's performance involved challenging an audience member to wrest objects from her grasp. For a member of Hurst's predominantly male audience, matching her strength to his own was a means of proving his masculinity to his peers. The notion of masculinity on trial was particularly significant in the late nineteenth century, a time when women were beginning to gain social power. As such, I argue that Hurst's demonstrations of strength are best understood within the context of what Marvin Carlson terms "resistant performance" – that is, performance that subverts the status quo by exposing its underlying assumptions. Drawing on Victor Turner's work on ritual and liminality, I argue that, when the individual male agent separated himself from his peers in order to challenge Hurst, his gender identity temporarily became destabilized. However, while Hurst may have disrupted the status quo by troubling gender binaries, her performance also served to reify existing social hierarchies. This paradox is a marker of both resistant performance and social change. For the postmodern reader, Hurst's performance is significant in that her demonstrations reveal the implications of resistant performance during a unique period of cultural transition in which gender identity was called into question.*

Introduction

Lulu Hurst, the sixteen-year-old girl described by the nineteenth-century press as the "Magnetic Girl," the "Georgia Wonder," or simply the "Phenomenon," performed a limited run of her demonstrations at New York City's Wallack's Theatre in the summer of 1884. In these demonstrations, Hurst would allegedly break umbrellas with her bare hands and lift grown men into the air, inviting audience members to come on stage to measure their strength against hers. She referred to such volunteers as "experimenters." In mixed-gender audiences, Hurst's experimenters were invariably men, but, during her ten-day run at the Wallack's Theatre, Hurst too entertained an all-female audience. This project explores and contextualizes the behavioural differences between Hurst's male and female experimenters and considers the implications of these differences in terms of *fin-de-siècle* anxiety over gender roles. While both audiences viewed Hurst not

as an opponent but as a mediator between themselves and their peers, they used Hurst's performance in different ways. Men used their onstage interactions with Hurst in order to compete with one another and assert (or discover) the limits of their masculinity. Women, on the other hand, used their interactions with Hurst to connect with one another socially and to engage in increasingly daring public acts. The way that Hurst interacted with men onstage received much attention from the nineteenth-century press, but Hurst's interactions with female experimenters have remained relatively overlooked.

With this in mind, I propose that the period during which Hurst performed marked a significant liminal phase for the United States with respect to gender roles. The notion of masculinity on trial was particularly significant in the late nineteenth century, a time when women were beginning to gain social power. Elaine Showalter has famously described this period as characterized by a "battle within the sexes" as well as between them (9). As such, I argue that the significance of Hurst's demonstrations are best understood by drawing on Victor Turner's work on ritual and liminality, since localized ritual activity can reveal much about larger cultural shifts and the kinds of liminal or marginal performances enacted and experienced by cultural others. Political anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen notes that Turner describes liminality as a "'betwixt and between' situation or object" (16). Turner's concept of liminality as a state of being "betwixt and between" is evident in *fin-de-siècle* culture, when both men and women found themselves struggling for self-definition with respect to gender roles and social expectations. While this study acknowledges much excellent scholarship on gender-bending in nineteenth-century theatre performance – for example, Laurence Senelick's *The Changing Room* and Kathleen B. Casey's *The Prettiest Girl on Stage Is a Man* – my focal point is not an argument for the virtues of gender-ambivalent performance; my focus, rather, is a consideration of how different audiences, segregated by gender, used Hurst's act to explore the constraints of *fin-de-siècle* gender roles.

Context

In each of Hurst's acts, an audience member (almost invariably a male one) is invited on stage to test what appears to be Hurst's uncanny physical strength. The man, or "experimenter," does not touch Hurst, as this would be a violation of etiquette. Instead, the struggle takes place via a specific object: an umbrella, a cane, or a chair, which the man attempts either to take or to move away from Hurst. By virtue of the performance, these mundane items are transformed into ritual objects and sites of literal struggle and resistance. The umbrella and the cane in particular are emblematic of the bourgeois male who constituted Hurst's primary audience. Through the dramatization of reversed gender roles, Hurst finds ways for an experimenter's strength to be turned back against him by using his own accessories. The events, refereed by Hurst's manager and her father, ensured that no one was hurt beyond the odd pratfall, and Hurst described her confrontations with experimenters as "tests," implying that her strength could be proved through a series of replicable experiments. For the audience, however, a test seemed to imply that the experimenter's masculinity was on trial. Here is the *New York Times*'s coverage of one of Hurst's 1884 evening performances, in an article tellingly titled "Children in Her Hands":

> Twenty strong, well-built club athletes, some of them rubber-shod, with short coats buttoned close around their shapely chests, climbed on to the stage of Wallack's Theatre last night and labored like blacksmiths for an hour to either tire out or "expose" Lulu Hurst, "the phenomenon of the nineteenth century," as the billboards call her. About 100 more less muscular but equally enthusiastic club men gathered in the front seats to watch the fun. The athletes retired from the stage after the performance covered with perspiration and confusion. The Georgia girl, who had tossed them about like so many jackstraws, was perfectly cool and not in the least tired. ("Children")

Notably, more attention is given to the men's physiques than to Hurst's. The men are "well-built" with "shapely chests" and are as accustomed as "blacksmiths" to

physical challenge. When the athlete experimenters leave the stage, the effect of their fruitless efforts is evident. They do not simply feel confused; they are "covered" with confusion. But, when Hurst is reinserted into the scene, her demeanour is described only in relation to the experimenters: she is "perfectly cool." In this manner, Hurst calmly destabilizes the gender identity of the men who meet her on stage. Further, with respect to gender, the reporter comments on Hurst's modesty, noting that she remains quiet, allowing her manager to do the speaking. In between acts, the "simple" and "unassuming" Hurst goes backstage to sip lemonade while her mother brushes her hair. Thus, the reporter implies that, while Hurst consistently undermines the gender identity of her male experimenters, she simultaneously manages not to compromise her own.

M. Alison Kibler's *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* discusses the tensions between male and female and high and low cultures in nineteenth-century vaudeville.[1] In an effort to tame rowdy audiences, the "feminization" of vaudeville began in the mid-nineteenth century; women, who were considered to be a taming influence on unruly men, were encouraged to attend the theatre with their children (Kibler 7). According to Kibler, in the early nineteenth century, most audiences were exclusively male, and women who attended the theatre alone (particularly in the evening) were suspected of being prostitutes. The reformed feminized vaudeville changed this perception by requiring that women come to the theatre only with male escorts. Vaudeville thus became part of a "sacralized, feminized" culture that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century (7). Hence, by the late nineteenth century, audiences were far more "refined" than they had been only a generation earlier (7). Kibler also points out that, while late-nineteenth-century vaudeville was explicitly constructed to appeal to white, middle-class women, unpublished managers' notes "demonstrate that vaudeville administrators approached the ideal female spectator and their impression of middle-class feminine tastes in contradictory

[1] Although the Wallack's Theatre was not known as a vaudeville theatre, nineteenth-century newspaper reporters frequently refer to Hurst's act as a "vaudeville-style" performance.

ways": while such administrators tried to honour delicate feminine sensibilities, they also "rewarded female performers who challenged the characterization of women as primarily reserved, delicate, and family-oriented" (77). In short, administrators were forced to respond to what was evidently a demand for women performers who did not adhere to prescribed gender roles. Hurst was one such performer. Newspaper articles similar to "Children in Her Hands" appeared in the *New York Times* every single night of Hurst's ten-day run, and the 10 July edition of the paper dedicated its longest front page article to Hurst's performance, trumping the capture of a diamond thief, several (allegedly) accidental shootings, and a runaway locomotive.

As each experimenter comes on stage to engage with Hurst, he (or sometimes she) is separated from the social collective and thereby positioned to operate as an individual agent. The idea of individual agency in tension with a larger social group resonates with Victor Turner's work on ritual – particularly his stance on liminality and what he calls "communitas."[2] According to Turner, during a ritual performance, a person is separated from the communitas and enters a temporarily liminal phase. The communitas, Turner says, is "unstructured or rudimentarily structured" (80), meaning that it reflects a community that is destabilized once various members of the larger group enter into a process of ritual. In the case of Hurst's demonstration, the communitas becomes the pool from which an individual experimenter is selected.

Turner writes that "all rites of passage [...] are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying 'threshold' in Latin), and aggregation" (79); that is, the individual is separated from the group and later reabsorbed after having undergone some form of transformation. In removing himself from a larger social group, the experimenter separates "either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions[,] [...] or from both.

[2] Turner clarifies his use of this term: "I prefer the Latin term 'communitas' to 'community,' to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an 'area of common living'" (80).

During the intervening 'liminal' period, [...] he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (79). Within the context of Hurst's demonstrations, the experimenters come face to face with Hurst and pass through a "cultural realm" in which they are temporarily divested of their gender identity. This is significant because, through the "experiment," the experimenter ostensibly receives an opportunity to discover something new: a new way of seeing himself in relation to the social collective, a new way of performing gender.

Male Experimenters

In her autobiography, Hurst describes her encounter with a group of male experimenters:

> They were arranged along the cane on the opposite side of it from me, as the big man was before. I laughed in their faces and put my hand on the cane, and lo! the "Power" came and – they went; hither and thither they swayed, and bent, and doubled up, and straightened out. They braced, and fell too. They lost their balance, and over they went in a heap one on top of the other. (21)

Although Hurst suggests early in her autobiography that she would not presume to ridicule her experimenters, the language she uses in this passage – particularly her claim to have "laughed in their faces" – seems evidence to the contrary. Here, the men come to appear ridiculous in their movement "hither and thither" and their apparent lack of control over their faculties. They are like marionettes that can be "swayed," "bent," "doubled up, and straightened out" at Hurst's whim. While on stage, the experimenters are stripped of agency and thus invite mockery. In fact, according to the *New York Times*, the "fun" for audience members comes in observing other men being publicly bested: "The audience got their wonted allowance of fun out of the performance by guying the experimenters, as they have been doing ever since the wonder began to exhibit the mystery of her muscle" ("Lulu's Wondrous Muscle"). Hurst's predominantly male audience,

therefore, chose to appropriate her performance in order to interrogate and reinscribe gender roles. And Hurst was able to command the attention of a male audience by appealing to a masculinist desire to compete. Hurst's performances allowed men to compete against one another and to celebrate one another's virility – or to ridicule a lack thereof.

Male experimenters are othered once they are separated from the social collective – or, in Turner's terms, communitas. Hurst is othered too, however, precisely because she is a woman. In effect, Hurst occupies the rhetorical space that Luce Irigaray refers to as "the sex which is not one" (23); that is, the female is always conceptualized in the terms of the universal subject, which is male. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (xv–xvi). This statement is clearly realized in Hurst's performances, in that her act is interpreted by the press as highlighting expectations for male behaviour rather than female behaviour, in relation to definitions the masculine rather than the feminine. Hurst is the means by which men succeed or fail to prove themselves, the means by which men can decide what makes other men manly. In this context, the affective power of Hurst's performance depends on a male counterpart, and her abilities are determined in terms of male capability. Women are thereby rendered peripheral, existing as a mere by-product of male self-definition. As the other, Hurst does not define what a man is. Rather, she acts as an intermediary, helping men to define themselves and to establish themselves as subjects – albeit subjects who cannot necessarily match her strength.

Male social roles are called into question when Hurst renders the male observer/participant temporarily passive and helpless before an audience. With each new conquest, Hurst directs the focus of the male gaze onto her ostensive opponent. The *New York Times* describes this objectification in the following terms:

"A young man took hold of the cane as though it were glass and simpered at Lulu. 'Now Adolphus,' said a voice, 'the eyes of the country are on you'" ("Lulu Hurst's Many Dresses"). The verb *simper* here suggests femininity, as does the young man's manner of handling the cane "as though it were glass." Moreover, the article refers directly to the experimenter's hypervisibility, one that might inversely imply Hurst's corresponding lack of visibility. And that the "voice" tells the hapless Adolphus that the "whole country" is watching him, when clearly the audience consists mainly of white, male New Yorkers, is indicative of the chauvinism of the era: only the judgment of the white, middle-class male is valid. Once a man is shamed in this milieu, he might as well be shamed before the entire country. The possibility of problematizing the relationship between male spectator and female performer is evident in Hurst's performance in that her presence is elided by drawing attention to a male experimenter who then becomes the object of the male gaze.

Ladies' Day

While men used Hurst's act to compete against one another in an effort to define, establish, and surpass the limits and constraints of masculinity, women used Hurst's act differently. Unfortunately, accurately discussing Hurst's relationship with women and women's responses to her performance presents a considerable challenge because, to the best of my knowledge, all of the articles about Hurst were written by men. Women's responses to Hurst (again limited to white, middle-class women) come from only one source: a newspaper account written by a (presumably) male reviewer on "Ladies' Day" at the Wallack's Theatre, where Hurst was performing to an all-female audience. The 17 July article, "Ladies' Day with Lulu: The Georgia Girl Exhibits Herself to an Audience of Ladies," covers the popular ladies' matinee offered by the Wallack's. The reviewer declares that "[t]he ladies turned out in force to take advantage of the opportunity to test the power of the wonder out of sight of wicked man." Here, the reviewer suggests not only that women are likely to get up to no good when away from men but also that the

"ladies" vilify men far more than is warranted. The author goes on to describe the many society ladies and actresses in the audience and their eagerness to see Hurst – as well as their apparent need to "banish" all the men from the room so that they might at last be "left alone to cope with the mystery of Lulu's muscle" ("Ladies' Day"). Even male ushers and policemen, previously understood to play a necessary role in theatre culture, were now deemed a nuisance and not welcome into the auditorium.

Hurst performed the same demonstrations with the women that she did with men, but the women were initially far more reluctant to be on display: according to the reviewer, they approached the stage "bashfully and seated themselves in a blushing semicircle." Hurst's besting of a "stout matron" drew a great deal of "cackling," but, unlike the male audiences, the women did not seem to be using Hurst to compete with one another; rather, they appeared to be using Hurst to break gender norms and to push one another to perform increasingly transgressive acts for each other's amusement. Audience heckling mainly took the form of laughter and demands for the experimenters to extend their time on stage by delivering speeches. For instance, when Hurst lifted one woman (referred to in the article as "Aunty Louise") into the air, the audience did not appear to interpret this as defeat on the experimenter's part; instead, they jokingly shouted for the woman to give a speech. They saw the physical elevation of one woman by another as a kind of triumph, and they encouraged the woman to deliver a speech during an era in which public speaking for women was discouraged. (Aunty Louise, however, is reported to have "waved her hand deprecatingly and said, 'I don't know the lines,'" a concession that was "rewarded with applause" all the same ["Ladies' Day"].)

The details of the women's matinee suggest that women sought to define and redefine gender roles in terms of transgression, evidently feeling free to play at such transgression in the absence of men. Hurst's act was a means by which female experimenters could practise a kind of bold behaviour that would not be

encouraged otherwise, and evidently this audience took great pleasure in doing so. In this manner, Hurst provided inspiration and amusement for women that blurred social boundaries, while, in contrast, she provided men with the opportunity to reify social binaries.

In her work on female vaudeville audiences, Kibler speaks of "contrasts between the vaudeville industry's construction of a polite female spectator and the actual female patrons," who could, given the right environment, sometimes be "loose and raucous" (13). At Hurst's "Ladies' Day," freed from the male gaze and from male judgment, the women apparently behaved quite differently around one another than they would have in a mixed audience. For one thing, the crowd became (in the reviewer's estimation) surprisingly raucous, with the women "cackling" and egging one another on: "The fair audience 'guyed' the experimenters on the stage with as much zest as the masculine audiences." Further, the theatre manager "who stood upon the outside steps of the theatre [...] said he had not heard so much cackling before since his grandparents were children" ("Ladies' Day"). This tongue-in-cheek aside and reference to "cackling" evokes witchery and a sense of gleeful naughtiness. Kibler reports that managers

> saw women in the audience as motherly and frail and were surprised by any evidence of their aggressiveness and sexuality. [...] Although accounts of women's uproarious (masculine) behavior appeared less frequently in managers' reports and in the published descriptions of vaudeville, this avenue of power for women reminds us that women did not simply pacify the vaudeville audience and that their role was not limited to exerting moral and aesthetic influence. (52)

Indeed, in the case of Lulu Hurst's "Ladies' Day," it may have been a relief to Hurst's audience to realize that they were finally in a situation in which they were not expected to exert a moral or "taming" influence on male theatregoers.

While, for men, the "battle within the sexes" manifested in the spirit of competition and in the dichotomy of manly and unmanly behaviour, the women's "battle within the sexes" involved less competition than a sense of "upping the ante" – women playfully goading each other to see how far they could push against acceptable boundaries, but within a "safe" all-female environment. In both scenarios, Hurst plays the role of what Brian Massumi calls the "third body." In *Politics of Affect*, Massumi refers to a component of chaos theory called the "three body problem":

> [I]f you have two bodies interacting, through gravity for example, everything is calculable and foreseeable.
>
> If you know where they are in relation to each at one moment, you can project a path and figure out where they were at any given moment in the past, or at a time in the future. But if you have three of them together what happens is that a margin of unpredictability creeps in. (17)

I argue that the experimenters with whom Hurst worked (in both the male-dominated and all-female settings) represented the first and second bodies in Massumi's formulation, while Hurst herself was the third – that is, the entity that might cause the first and second bodies to move in unexpected directions. The lack of predictability that arises with the insertion of a third body is alluring because it demonstrates ways in which constraints can be explored, responded to, and sometimes temporarily overcome. The third body thus offers the potential to "flip[] the constraints over into conditions of freedom," in Massumi's words (17). He goes on: "Freedom is not about breaking or escaping constraints. It's about flipping them over into degrees of freedom. You can't really escape the constraints. No body can escape gravity" (17). But what "freedom" did men find in competing against one another to defeat Hurst? Perhaps men needed the freedom to fail, to experience defeat in a play-oriented situation. And perhaps it was freeing for men not to be pitted directly against one another in competition but to be able to explore their masculinity and its various implications through an

intermediary. Meanwhile, Hurst, as a third body, helped female audiences to enact new social roles: in the absence of men, women became more apt to encourage the performance of feminine strength.

Femininity and Fraudulence

The struggle both within and between the sexes is expressed with particular eloquence in a *New York Times* review of Hurst's final Wallack's Theatre performance: when one "strapping big fellow" was invited on stage to challenge Hurst, "[h]e threw two kisses to the audience and kicked out one leg playfully behind" ("Lulu Hurst's Many Dresses"). The man's action can be read in multiple ways, not least of which is to offer a commentary on the failed masculinity of the other presenters by suggesting that they are too effeminate to defeat Hurst. (Significantly, he actually succeeds in overpowering Hurst, apparently an unusual occurrence.) Moreover, in the context of nineteenth-century gendered performance, his gesture can be read as revealing what Kibler terms the "tension between masculine and feminine, authenticity and artifice" (205). Simply put, the "big fellow" exposes Hurst as a fraud, in and of itself a commentary on the state of what many middle-class men believed to be a lamentably feminized vaudeville, exposing Hurst as an exemplar of what Kibler terms "the unskilled, fraudulent vaudeville star," who was more often than not a woman (207). Since Hurst is seen to be mimicking a man (and a little too effectively at that), the man, by mimicking her, seems compelled to put her back in her place, thereby reminding her of her station. In effect, Hurst's opponent reminds her that she does not have a man's power and never will. He appropriates a femininely coded gesture as an ostentatious act designed to subvert Hurst's ritual, and social boundaries are thereby effectively reinscribed.

This disruption of Hurst's ritual – and the ritual bond she created between herself and her audience – served to remind everyone of his or her place in the existing social hierarchy. According to Turner, all ritual incorporates the concept of liminality, and this liminality is significant because it involves "giving

recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low" (81). In other words, the ritual constitutes an essential social process in that it reminds participants of the sorts of bonds and relationships that hold a society together. In the case of Hurst's demonstrations, no man could feel "lower" than when ostensibly defeated by a mere girl before an audience of his peers – yet, all the same, experiencing this is a necessary part of reminding himself that he is male. After all, metaphorical defeat at the hands of a woman does not equate to literal defeat. Beyond the walls of the Wallack's Theatre, the Victorian-era male could return immediately to his privileged status, while women (including Hurst) were required to remember their inferiority.

Importantly, these male needs could be addressed in the presence of female companions or others who played a passive role during mixed-gender performances. Women, however, could only have their ritual needs met if they were separated from men. In engaging with Hurst, the experimenter's gender identity becomes temporarily destabilized: a female experimenter's physical participation was a transgression of gender boundaries, while male experimenters were in danger of being knocked to the ground and humiliated. However, the fact that women were willing to engage with Hurst only in an all-female forum suggests that they anticipated a less forgiving response to such behaviour in their ordinary lives.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, men and women were at odds over public and private gender roles. While men attempted to reinforce and redefine the notion of masculinity, women struggled with similar concerns about being feminine – that is, how they wished to be viewed both in and out of the home. During this period of uncertainty, the concept of gender itself became an increasingly liminal category. Indeed, gendered liminality had perhaps become routine. This kind of

relationship – the connection between social disorder and the struggle for an eventual rediscovery of structure – is of particular interest to political anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen, who examines acts of cultural agency within restrictive social structures and considers how these acts can become blueprints for patterns that indicate far larger cultural shifts. But how do we identify, interpret, and contextualize these acts of agency? Hurst's performances appealed to men and women in distinctly different ways. For women, the air of the performance was celebratory, perhaps reflecting how women were reimagining their social roles. Male audiences, meanwhile, encountered a tenser, more competitive atmosphere. This contrast is important to our understanding of both resistant performance and sociocultural liminality.

Thomassen discusses Turner's coinage of the term "liminoid," asserting that "Turner suggested that liminal experiences in modern consumerist societies [...] have been replaced by 'liminoid' moments, where creativity and uncertainty unfold in art and leisure activities" (15). This reading of Turner suggests that, in consumerist societies, experiences of the liminal can be mimicked, allowing consumers to participate in risk-free experiences of proto-liminality. While Hurst's demonstrations can certainly be interpreted in these terms, her performance cannot be dismissed as mere play. While the liminoid suggests a brief "break from normality, a playful as-if experience," it "loses the key feature of liminality: *transition*" (Thomassen 15). Thomassen believes that the implications of the liminoid might be far more meaningful than Turner initially proposed, in that the liminal and the liminoid are not easily categorized or separated from one another. Mere play-acting to one person may, to another, eventually become a profound transitional moment. Many of these liminoid "as-if" experiences could potentially be interpreted as socially significant acts of agency. Hence, while the status quo reifies itself and naturalizes gender socialization via the endless reproduction and homogeneity of gendered behaviour, performances such as Hurst's can destabilize gender categories by emphasizing the differences between

members of a same-sex group, or, to return to Showalter, "within the sexes." Hurst's demonstrations thus provide various examples of *fin-de-siècle* versions of liminality, particularly with respect to battles within and between the sexes.

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Elizabeth Lowry is a Lecturer in Rhetoric and Composition at Arizona State University. She holds a PhD in Rhetoric and Language from Arizona State and an MFA from New York University.

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